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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine the current attitudes of male and female, rural, urban, and suburban students in grades 3, 6, 9, and 12 regarding the status of elementary and secondary public school teachers. Students (N=904) responded to a 28-item questionnaire designed to assess their attitudes about teacher status. The questions were developed to reveal significant differences in attitudes of students at different grade levels and of different genders. Student responses indicated significant gender and grade differences in attitudes. More responses favoring teaching were selected by female than by male students. Third-grade students had the highest percentage of positive responses regarding teacher status, followed by twelfth-, sixth-, and ninth-grade students, in that order. While the majority of students indicated positive feelings about the performance of their own teachers and viewed teaching as a job to be proud of, they did not perceive teaching as a viable career option for themselves. An analysis of student responses is presented and suggestions are made for the direction of future research studies. (JD)

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Teacher Status: What Students Think About the Profession

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, teaching and teaching as a professional choice have been the focus of several national reports and research investigations. Unfortunately, while teachers are generally held in high regard, teaching as a profession is not. National polls, which have been concerned with attitudes toward teaching held by teachers themselves, adults, and high school students, have indicated that there has been a significant decline in teacher status (Elam, 1984; Gallup, 1984, 1985). This is a perplexing problem for those of us who have dedicated our lives to the teaching profession and who hope that capable students will choose to teach. One might ask, are we as educators projecting what we value?

Previous studies which have been designed to investigate the status of teachers and teaching as a profession have surveyed the attitudes held by teachers, adults, high school students, and college students. The purpose of this was study to determine the current attitudes of selected male and female, rural, urban, and suburban students in grades three, six, nine, and twelve regarding the status of elementary and secondary public school teachers. This range of student age was selected for study because missing from the literature are studies which focus on elementary or middle school students' attitudes about teacher status.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPOSED STUDY

With national efforts being directed toward enhancing the

image of teachers (Givens, 1987), it would be helpful to determine if younger students have similar or different perceptions about teacher status from those held by adults and high school seniors. Results of this research may indicate that efforts need to be directed toward establishing or maintaining favorable attitudes toward teaching and toward attracting able students into the profession. Development of programs which expose students to the idea that teaching is a positive career alternative may be necessary to foster more favorable attitudes toward teaching.

BACKGROUND

From a historical perspective, teaching in the United States has been an undervalued occupation. Almost from the beginning of education in America, except when it was tied to church status, teaching has held little prestige (Stinnett, 1968; Walsh, 1926). Several factors have influenced teacher status through the years.

Dating back to precolonial times, the low status of non-collegiate teaching was related to the low priority given to education in an agricultural society (Hoffman, 1981; Walsh, 1926). Evidence of the low priority of education was seen in the nonselectivity of those who entered teaching. Teachers lacked academic qualifications; servants and apprentices were included in the teaching ranks, and there were no required programs of training or standards for certification (Adams & Garrett, 1969; Elsbree, 1939; Sykes, 1983). Low salaries and poor working conditions, which often included non-teaching responsibilities,

were further indications of the low status of these early American teachers (Adams, & Garrett, 1969).

During the nineteenth century, as the population increased and public education expanded, women, who had few employment alternatives, were attracted to teaching (Hoffman, 1981; Lortie, 1975; Spencer, 1986). They were welcomed into the teaching profession by school boards because they could be hired for less money than men (Freedman, Jackson, & Boles, 1983). Female teachers were also preferred by administrators because they were more compliant and less ambitious than male teachers (Tyack, 1974). During this educational expansion, the limited training of these new teachers contributed to the subordination of women teachers to male administrators and schools developed into hierarchical organizations. Teaching became a women's job, and men began to avoid it. Without male prestige and with the image of teaching as women's work, teaching was relegated to a second-rate profession (Hoffman, 1981).

Teacher status was further affected by the professional standards which were slow to improve. Despite the inception of normal schools for the training of teachers during the mid 1800s, preparation and certification requirements were inconsistent until around 1970 when all states finally required a bachelor's degree for teacher certification at either the elementary or secondary level (Kerr, 1983). Unfortunately, the increased educational requirements for teachers did not result in significantly improved teacher status. Although teaching was

referred to as a profession by some, others argued that teaching should be classified as a semi-profession (Etzioni, 1969; Spencer, 1986; Stinnett, 1968).

Other features of teaching also contributed to its low stature. Teaching is an unstaged career with little potential for upward mobility and no opportunity for promotion or pay based on job performance (Lightfoot, 1983; Lortie, 1975). The work assigned to a first year teacher is the same as that assigned to a teacher with many years of experience. Therefore, little recognition has been given to the expert knowledge acquired by teachers through years of experience in the classroom (Bush, 1970; Lightfoot, 1983).

Financial considerations have played a major role in teacher status. Reiss (1970) indicated that average income is more powerful in determining the prestige component of an occupation than is education. He suggested that teacher status is well below that of other professions because of the income teachers receive which falls below that of most other occupations that require a college degree (Bird, 1985; Bolin, 1987; Darling-Hammond, 1984).

An additional factor that has affected teacher status is the considerable emphasis on declining teacher quality. While some have cautioned against overgeneralizing about the decline in teacher quality, others have indicated that there has been a substantial decline in the academic qualifications of those entering the teaching force (Nelson, 1985; Schlechty & Vance,

1981; Stinnett, 1968; Pigge, 1985; Weaver, 1983). It has also been suggested that the best and brightest who enter teaching are the ones who leave the profession soon after entering (Darling-Hammond, 1984).

Attitudes About Teaching

An examination of the literature regarding attitudes about the teaching profession further illustrates the problem of teacher status. Studies which examined teachers' attitudes about teaching suggested that teachers believe the status of their profession has deteriorated in recent years and that teaching has a low standing in comparison with other professions (Edman, 1968; Gallup, 1984; Lortie, 1986).

Further evidence of a decrease in the professional status of teaching was illustrated in a recent publication summarizing surveys about the public's attitudes toward teaching. Elam (1984) reported that between 1969 and 1983 the percentage of parents who said they would like one of their children to become a public school teacher dropped from 75% to 45%.

In addition to investigations of teachers' and the public's attitudes about teaching, a few studies have focused on high school seniors' attitudes about teaching. A common thread running through these studies was that only a small percentage of students indicated they would consider teaching as a potential career (Clark, 1987; Page, Page, Hawk, & Lindsey, 1981; Tincher and Brogdon, 1986; White, 1986). Students were found to have favorable attitudes about their teachers (Clark, 1987; White,

1986) and teaching was seen to have a positive contribution to society (Tincher & Brogdon, 1986); nevertheless, low salaries were considered by a majority of students as a major drawback to teaching (Clark, 1987; Page, Page, Hawk & Lindsey, 1981; Tincher & Brogdon, 1986; White, 1986). Low teacher status was also a negative factor, as well as discipline problems and poor working conditions (Page, Page, Hawk & Lindsey, 1981; Tincher & Brogdon, 1986). Interestingly, one study indicated that of those high school seniors who were actually contemplating a teaching career, less than 1% said that school counselors had presented teaching for their consideration as a career possibility (Page, Page, Hawk, & Lindsey, 1981).

It appears that while many high school seniors view their teachers favorably and perceive teaching as an occupation which contributes to society, the large majority of these students do not intend to enter the teaching profession. It is also possible that students are not being encouraged to enter the teaching profession by school personnel.

METHODOLOGY

Nine hundred and four students from selected intact classes in rural, suburban, and urban schools were asked by one investigator to respond to a 28 item questionnaire designed to assess students' attitudes about teacher status. This questionnaire included the following five categories of items reflecting factors which have historically influenced teacher status: 1) the status of the teaching occupation, 2) teacher

quality and qualifications, 3) the nature of the work of teaching, 4) teacher gender, and 5) monetary considerations. Additional categories focused on students' attitudes about school and their own academic performance.

The following questions directed this investigation:

1) Are there significant differences in the attitudes of students in selected classes in grades three, six, nine, and twelve regarding the status of the teacher?

2) Are there significant differences in the attitudes of male and female students in selected classes regarding the status of the teacher?

Student responses were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Chi square analysis was used to test for significance of differences in responses to items containing nominal data. The F-test (two-way analysis of variance) was used to test for significance of differences in responses on items containing continuous data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Significant gender and grade level differences were evident in student responses to questionnaire items regarding the status of the teacher. Gender differences were evident for eight of the eighteen questionnaire items which addressed various aspects of teacher status. In each case, significantly more responses favoring teaching were selected by female than by male students. Furthermore, significant grade level differences occurred in student responses on seventeen of the eighteen items addressing

teacher status. In the majority of these items, third grade students had the highest percentage of positive responses regarding teacher status, followed by twelfth, sixth, and ninth grade students in that order. Occasionally, twelfth grade students had the most responses favoring teaching. In almost every case, ninth grade students had the fewest responses favoring teaching.

In summary, the results of this study indicated that there were significant grade level and gender differences in the attitudes of students in selected third, sixth, ninth, and twelfth grade classes regarding the status of the teacher.

Analyses

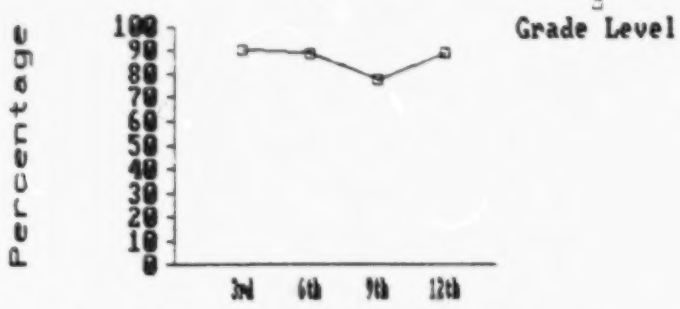
These findings were quite interesting since it appears that while the majority of students felt very positive about the performance of their own teachers and they viewed teaching as a job to be proud of, they did not perceive teaching as a viable career option for themselves. The following discussion provides an analysis of a possible rationale for these data.

Analyses of Items Regarding Teacher Quality and Qualifications

Despite evidence that suggests teacher quality to be declining (Schlechty & Vance, 1981; Weaver, 1983), students in this study rated the performance of their teachers as very high. Seven questionnaire items were designed to ascertain students' perceptions of teacher quality and qualifications. More than eighty-five percent of all students responded "yes" to the question, "Do you think your school has mostly good teachers?"

Third and twelfth grade students were the most inclined to respond "yes" to this question as is evident in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1



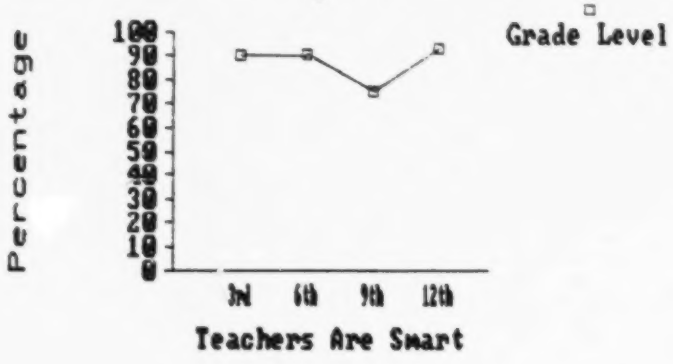
Our School Has Mostly Good Teachers

In response to another item pertaining to teacher quality, the majority of students (75.6%) indicated that teachers in their schools were doing an excellent or a good job. While there were no significant gender differences in responses on either of these items regarding teacher quality, grade level trends were significant. Third grade students were the most positive about their teachers, while ninth grade students were the least positive.

In addition to assessing student attitudes about teacher performance, students were also asked to state their opinions regarding teacher intelligence. While a majority of students credited teachers with being smart and with getting good grades when they were students, significant gender differences were apparent. More female than male students attributed higher

grades to teachers and indicated that teachers were smart. The same grade level trends reported earlier were again observed. (See Figure 2) Here, once again, ninth grade students had the lowest mean scores, with an increase in means for twelfth grade students.

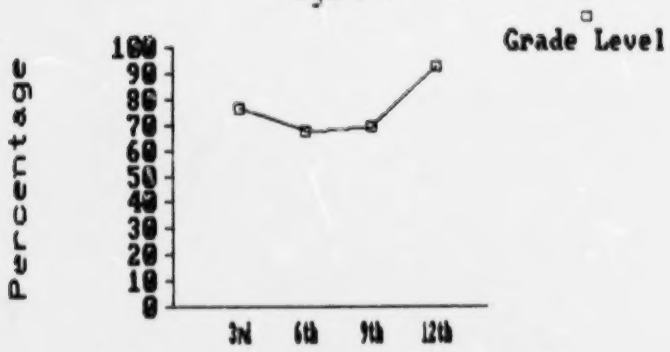
Figure 2



Analyses of Items Pertaining to The Status of Teaching

While students evidenced positive attitudes about teachers' abilities and performance, changes in students' attitudes about teaching became obvious as additional questions regarding status were addressed. An overwhelming majority of students thought teaching was a job to be proud of. Interestingly, twelfth grade students were the most likely to select the response supporting the statement, "Teaching is a job to be proud of." (See Figure 3) Additionally, females were significantly more inclined to agree with this statement.

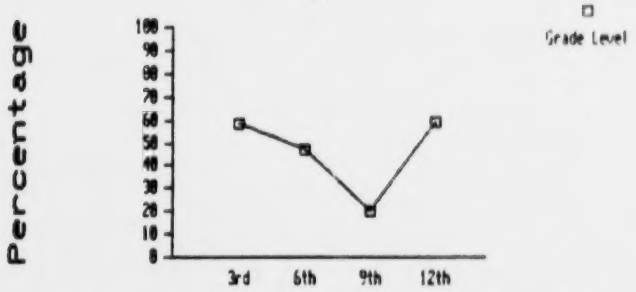
Figure 3



Teaching Is A Job To Be Proud Of

Students' positive responses declined considerably when rating teaching as a good or an excellent job. Grade level trends previously observed were repeated here as reflected in Figure 4. Gender differences were also similar to the preceding item with females having more positive responses than males.

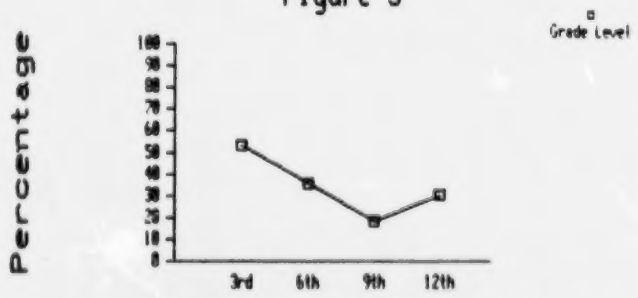
Figure 4



Teaching Is An Excellent/Good Job

A further decline in the percentages of students' positive responses was evident in conjunction with the statement, "Teaching is one of the best jobs I can think of." Here, more students disagreed than agreed with this statement. As illustrated in Figure 5, grade level differences were consistent with previous items. Females were also more positive about teaching; 40% of females versus 28% of males agreed with this statement.

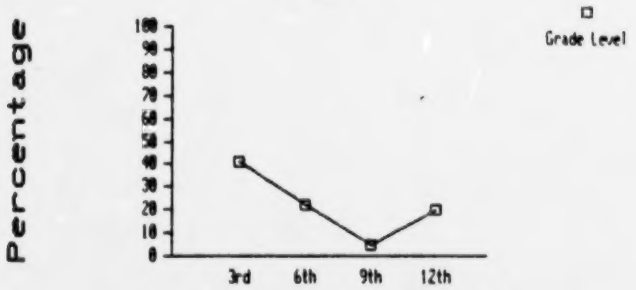
Figure 5



Teaching As One of the Best Jobs

The final indictment of teaching as a professional choice was evident by the decline in the percentage of students who indicated a desire to become teachers. The average percentage of yes responses to the question, "Would you like to be a teacher?" was 22%, while 52% responded that they would not like to be a teacher and 26% responded "don't know." Sex differences were prominent here also. Almost one third of the females responded "yes" while only 11.5% of the males said "yes." The significant grade level trends noted earlier held here as well. (See Figure 6)

Figure 6



Would Like To Be A Teacher

These are perplexing issues. One certainly begins to wonder what factors are causing students to discount teaching as a career choice. In the analysis of these data, the gender and grade level differences emerge. Female students were consistently more positive about the status of teaching than male students. This gender difference mirrors results of earlier investigations (Clark, 1987; Tincher & Brogdon, 1986; White, 1986) and may be a reflection of a general identification of teaching as a female occupation reported in the literature (Bilken, 1987; Bush, 1970).

In examining grade level differences, it is interesting to note that despite the decline in positive attitudes about teaching between third and ninth grade, there is a consistent, albeit small, increase in positive responses between ninth and twelfth grade. This may indicate that as students near the age when they have to make more serious decisions about their own careers, teaching regains some status and credibility as a career choice.

Analyses of Items Comparing Teaching With Other Occupations

The decline in positive responses regarding the status of teaching may be explained in part by examining students' attitudes comparing teaching and teachers with others and their occupations. When asked to compare teachers with doctors, police officers and workers at McDonalds on how well they each did as former students, most subjects rated teachers as being good former students; but, variations in response patterns occurred. Doctors were perceived as having received higher grades than teachers, while teachers were perceived as having received higher grades than workers at McDonalds by the majority of students. The comparison with police officers was inconsistent. Third grade students favored police over teachers, while more students in the other grades indicated that teachers had outperformed police officers in school.

When students were asked questions which compared how hard teaching was with other jobs, teaching was perceived as being easier than being a doctor or a police officer and harder than working at McDonalds. Inconsistencies in grade level patterns were apparent here, particularly for third grade students. These students were more likely to indicate that teachers work as hard as doctors and less likely to designate teaching as harder than working at McDonalds. On the other hand, the majority of students at each grade level indicated that teaching was easier than being a police officer. This perception may be a reflection of current media coverage of the work of police officers.

Overall, it appears that students may perceive that teaching is not too difficult; this is particularly true for younger students.

Consistent with results of the preceding item, when students were asked to compare teacher salaries with salaries earned by doctors, police officers, and workers at McDonalds, the majority indicated that both doctors and police officers should earn more money, while workers at McDonalds should earn less money than teachers. These responses may reflect students' perceptions of teaching as easier than being a doctor or police officer and harder than working at McDonalds. There were some gender and grade level differences here, also. Females, more than males, favored teachers in terms of earning power when comparing teachers to both doctors and workers at McDonalds. More younger students thought teachers should earn as much as doctors; however, these younger students were less likely than older students to indicate that teachers should earn more money than workers at McDonalds. This may be because younger students are less sophisticated in their ability to analyze job difficulty and worth.

In summary, when teachers were compared with three other categories of workers, they did not fare particularly well. Doctors were seen as smarter, harder working, and deserving of more pay than teachers. Police officers, while not viewed as smarter than teachers, were perceived as working harder and deserving more money. Only when compared with workers at

McDonalds were teachers favored. It is difficult to draw conclusions based on these responses because of the limited sampling of occupations with which teaching was compared and because of the lack of similarity between those jobs and teaching. However, these results do indicate that students in this study had similar attitudes as others were found to have (Bose, 1985) about teaching being lower in status than doctors and higher in status than restaurant workers.

Analyses of Items Pertaining to Students' Academic Performance and Attitudes about School

Students had positive attitudes about school; and, for the most part, they indicated that they were doing well academically. More than half the students said they like school all or most of the time, and approximately 30% said they like school some of the time. The same gender and grade level differences in response patterns seen in previous items were again evident here.

Students reported relatively high grades for themselves. More than half of the students indicated that they usually get A's and B's, while almost forty percent said they get B's and C's. Differences between males and females were not significant here; however, grade level differences were again significant. Proportionally, more third grade students reported having high grades; and, as grade levels increased, self-reported grades decreased. These differences in grades may be a reflection of grade level differences in accurately assessing grades, or they may indicate actual differences in grading between elementary and

secondary school.

Implications

The results of this investigation indicate that further research should be undertaken to help determine why so many students do not want to be teachers despite positive attitudes about their own teachers and about some aspects of teaching. If, as this study suggests, female students and third grade students have more positive attitudes about teaching, it appears that both grade level and gender differences in attitudes about teacher status may be affecting student selection of teaching as a career. Implications of this research suggest that educators may need to take an active role in fostering positive attitudes about teaching as they come in daily contact with their students. Not only should counselors encourage students to consider teaching as a career option, it may also be necessary for educators to develop curriculum that will present teaching as a favorable profession. These efforts may be most beneficial if they are directed toward enhancing the image of the teacher among male students and among young adolescents.

Further research needs to be conducted to ascertain the causes of the considerable decline in positive attitudes among adolescents regarding teaching as a career option. It may be necessary for educators to evaluate the changes in the school setting that take place between elementary and high school which may exacerbate negative attitudes about teaching and school evident in responses by sixth and ninth grade students. Attempts

to eliminate some of these factors contributing to adolescents' negative attitudes may be necessary.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations which should be taken into consideration. One has to do with the limited sample selection. Students were selected from public schools in only four school districts in one area of the United States. Generalizations of results are limited by both the limited sample size and representativeness of the sample. Another limitation is related to the instrument for this study which focused on only some of the factors that have been shown to influence teacher status. Finally, a limitation always possible with attitude measurements is that students may select responses according to what they think the investigator wants.

Directions for Future Research

The present research has indicated that grade level and gender differences exist in students' attitudes about the status of teaching. Future research should be undertaken to expand the findings of the present study. Research should be conducted with larger samples and with subjects from a wider geographic area. Students in additional grades should be included in future research to further delineate grade level differences. Further research should be carried out to determine if negative attitudes toward teaching held by adolescents are indicative of a more general negative perspective related to development or specific to the topic of teaching and school. The content of items on the

questionnaire should be expanded to include more factors found to influence teacher status. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to determine how younger students' attitudes change with time and whether those who responded favorably about teaching at various ages, later became teachers. Finally, additional research is necessary to determine what are the most feasible ways that positive attitudes about teacher status and teaching can be fostered.

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